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ABSTRACT

The present crisis in education is so severe that to return to the "basics," or simply to improve the standard approach to instruction, will only make the situation worse. Missing is a recognition of the importance of the imagination in the learning process. I. A. Richards (1925) has identified six distinct aspects of the imagination: (1) the production of vivid images, usually visual; (2) the use of figurative language; (3) the sympathetic reproduction of other people's states of mind; (4) inventiveness in the combining of disparate ideas; (5) relevant connections for scientific or technical purposes; and (6) the recognition of opposite or discordant ideas. Educators need to encourage a literacy of the imagination. In order to achieve this, the focus of classroom activity needs to shift from providing answers to helping students formulate thoughtful, carefully worded questions which are important to them. Students should feel that what they bring to the class is of value. They must be placed in classes appropriate to their level of skill. Assignments need to emphasize the acquisition, rather than the display, of knowledge. Teachers should encourage an ongoing evaluation of their work by students, and attempt more frequently to take the viewpoint of the learners. Learners should be encouraged to function as a community, rather than as individuals in competition with one another. Administrators, too, should be seen by faculty as both contributors and learners in this community. The use of interactive multimedia technology can contribute to the process. Realizing this new learning environment would require a substantial investment, not of cash, but of imagination. (JSP)

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"IMAGINATION BODIES FORTH THE FORMS OF THINGS UNKNOWN"

Reflections on the Crisis in Education

Presented
By
James H. Streeter

A.C.C.C. Conference
Montreal, Quebec
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"IMAGINATION BODIES FORTH THE FORMS OF THINGS UNKNOWN"

Reflections on the Crisis in Education

I'm pleased to be here with you today to celebrate the excellent things that are happening in some classrooms across the country; I'm concerned about what is being referred to as a crisis in education; I'm excited by the challenge this crisis presents to those of us who are proud of our profession and have a passion for education.

Each of us here today knows of classrooms where effective learning is taking place; each of us can name teachers who have managed to create an atmosphere where that essential relationship between teacher, student, content and milieu is present, nurtured and appreciated.

Each of us is aware that the drop-out rate in our High Schools, Colleges and Universities is increasing, and that many students are turned off and angry at a system that has failed them. Hardly a day has gone by in the past few months when we haven't been reminded by the media that we aren't doing our jobs. Thoughtful people in the field of education as well as the self-righteous know-it-alls are crying out for reform. The same cries have been heard in the United States for many years, especially since **A NATION AT RISK: THE IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM** was published in 1983.

The critics' comments point in two directions:

1) a return to the basics (reactionary)
2) do more of what we've been doing but do it a little better (conservative)

I believe the situation is so severe that to return to the so-called basics or to do more of what we've been doing, even if we do it a little better, will make things worse. If the educational system is to improve and flourish, we must confront the challenges we're faced with in an imaginative and courageous way, or, as Marshall McLuhan warned us years ago, we may have to cancel the future!

I think what is missing from the solution to many of our problems is an essential aspect of education which has gone almost unnoticed - the imagination. Let me share with you some of my thoughts about the imagination and what it has to offer us as a way through some of the difficulties and challenges we face as educators.

The title of this presentation "Imagination Bodies Forth the Forms of Things Unknown" reminds us of the role imagination played in the painting, poetry, architecture and music of the Renaissance. It was Shakespeare's imagination which gave us a reservoir of images which connect the inner world of man (the invisible) with the outer world of nature (the visible.) It was John Donne's eclectic imagination which saw the relationship between a compass and the

struggle of lovers to maintain their individual identities. It was the Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge, who saw imagination as having the capacity to reduce multitude into unity. In our own time, Northrop Frye reminded us that no matter how much experience we gather in life, we can never get the dimension of experience that the imagination gives us. And finally, the American poet Marianne Moore said that the imagination gives us an "emotional shorthand."

How does the imagination work and how can we make use of it to address the situation we face?

In 1925, I.A. Richards spoke of SIX distinct senses of the imagination:

1. the production of vivid images, usually visual
2. the use of figurative language
3. the sympathetic reproducing of other people's states of mind
4. inventiveness in the combining of disparate ideas
5. relevant connections for scientific or technical purposes
6. the recognition of opposite or discordant ideas

What Richards seems to be giving us here in these six distinct senses is a description of the well-educated mind. It's also what Ontario's Minister of Education, Tony Silipo, was talking about in an article on education which appeared recently in the Toronto

Star. Silipo reminded us that it wasn't enough to teach students to read and write; we have a responsibility to teach students the analytical, critical and evaluative skills essential for survival in a changing world. I don't think we can accomplish this task without coming to terms with the importance of the imagination in the learning process.

Imagination works through the medium of metaphor. Metaphors are created because of our desire to associate, to identity and to connect. They provide the opportunity to look at one thing and see another.

How the imagination works to bring out the best in students is seen in the teaching methods of American artist, Sister Corita Kent. In her art classes at Immaculate College in California, Sister Corita encouraged the artist in all her students, even those who felt they had little aptitude for such endeavours.

She encouraged the students to develop their imagination by asking them to look for connections between things that, at first glance, appeared to have nothing in common. When the students began to see connections, they also discovered that they were thinking metaphorically. In a film made about her teaching methods (it's called "We Have No Art: We do Everything as Well as We Can") she tells her class that when we live imaginatively we slow down the process of judgment; it's this slowing down process that produces

tolerance or the ability to perceive someone or something from more than one perspective. "Art", Corita says, "is a way of saying, hey, maybe you've missed something."

It's not sufficient to teach what is commonly, and I think wrongly, called the basics. We have a responsibility to educate the imagination of our students. Since the imagination is a world of possibilities - linguistic possibilities - as educators we should be encouraging a literacy of the imagination.

How can we achieve this literacy in our classrooms and in our colleges?

I suggest we need to start with a change of attitude. I think we need to say publicly and certainly to our students that much of what we have done in the classroom is either for ourselves or for the administration of our institutions. It's time for us to meet the needs of the learners in our colleges.

Let's look at where this change in attitude could take us.

1. In a world where answers are available outside the classroom, let's put the questions INSIDE the classroom. Let's spend a considerable amount of time helping our students to formulate thoughtful, carefully worded questions which are important to them. This will take considerable courage on our part because

we're so used to having the right answers to almost everything. We may need to remind ourselves that once we've got the answers there's very little left to say. We know that people who have the answers usually bring dialogue to a halt.

2. Let us begin each semester by showing students that we respect them and what they bring to our classes. This would include their knowledge, experience, language skills, attitudes and values. We may wish, even pray, that these were different (that means more like ours), but we can't take students where they need to go unless we accept them where they are when we meet them.

3. Let's not spend too much class time giving quizzes, tests, and other activities which make us look like we've done a lot of work. When we assign an activity, we should ask ourselves what we want to accomplish through this particular assignment. Why am I doing this? What purpose does it serve? Sometimes the answers to these questions will surprise us.

4. If we're uncomfortable with the response to our own questions, let's have the guts to scrap the assignment and start over. It wouldn't, for example, be a bad idea to set examinations for students which we could pass. It might encourage students to become engaged in learning if we gave assignments which helped them acquire knowledge rather than simply display it.

5. Let's not be afraid to evaluate our own work and ask our students to join us in the evaluation. This needs to be a frequent and ongoing activity. We need to stop and ask our students if we're doing okay. We know the reasons we rarely do this, don't we. For some teachers the classroom is an incredible power trip and the students are the victims. It takes an imaginative teacher to see the needs of students and to put his/her own needs on the back burner and leave them there.

6. Let's have the courage to take a close look at the figure/ground relationships in our classrooms. The figure is easily recognizable, but the ground will take some work.

This idea of the figure/ground relationship was dramatically illustrated when Pasteur was thrown out of the medical profession because he insisted that doctors wash their hands before surgery; they knew better; they could SEE that their hands were clean. Consciously noted elements are the figure, everything else is the ground. The action takes place in the interplay between the two as illustrated by the relationship between the wheel and the axle. If you want to see how this works and you want to get at the structure of things, just reverse the figure/ground relationship. ***Let your students set the exams and you take them!*** Too often we overlook the fact that there are numerous advantages in taking the viewpoint of the learner.

7. Let's see our classrooms as communities of learners and not individuals in competition with one another; let's try to create what the characters in the film Fried Green Tomatoes did - a conspiracy of concern and affection. Let's not see the learners in our classrooms as processors of information, but as self-directed problem-solvers and then we can give assignments which develop these skills and attitudes.

8. Let's examine our students' readiness for what our subjects have to offer them; if the students are not ready let's not place them in subjects where they will fail again and again until they are convinced that they are stupid and don't deserve to be in college.

9. Let's help our students to develop an exactitude of thought so they won't become prisoners of propaganda. One of the best ways to develop this skill is through the experience of literature where there can be no intensity without precision.

10. Let's put a stop to the we/they split which exists in many of our colleges. It is neither appropriate nor productive in the electronic age. Faculty need to see Administrators (and they must see themselves) as learners and important contributors to and supporters of the learning environment.

11. Let's experiment with the exciting interactive-multimedia available for educational purposes and not be afraid that it will replace us in the classroom. By its very nature much of

it is closer to the thinking processes of our students than the linear, sequential medium of the textbook.

Yes, all of this would require a substantial investment - not of cash but in imagination. The most important element we can help our students develop is their imagination. It is this element which will provide them with the vision, hope and courage to become life-long learners. If we feel an investment in the imagination is not worthwhile, think of how the imagination served Terry Waite while he was being held hostage for five long and torturous years. The imagination is the most labyrinthine of the human faculties; it "bodies forth the forms of things unknown". If we are going to see our way out of the present crisis in education, faculty, students, and administrators need to imagine - to think the unthinkable.

I suggest to you that the future holds marvellous opportunities for educators and learners; it also holds pitfalls. The trick, as Woody Allen tells us, is to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities and get back home by six o'clock.

Good luck!

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges

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